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## Education, skills, sustainability and growth: Complex relations

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### ABSTRACT

The global education agenda, embedded in the Education for All (EFA) Goals, and the Millennium Development Goals, has emphasised the importance of reaching EFA rather than sustaining this achievement. As a corollary, the emphasis for external aid has also been on increasing aid to secure EFA rather than on the dangers of aid dependency in securing and sustaining EFA. The international architecture in support of education for sustainable development appears to have little interest in analysing these tensions between the pursuit of these rights-based EFA Goals, on the one hand, and the kind of economic growth and macro-economic environment that would be necessary to sustain their achievement.

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For many developing countries since the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien in 1990, and more especially since the Dakar World Forum on Education in 2000, and the elaboration of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) later that same year, there has been an international concern to assist their reaching the six Dakar Targets. While there has been some very thorough work on analysing progress towards most of these Dakar Goals (e.g. the Global Monitoring Reports [GMRs] on Education for All [EFA]),<sup>1</sup> there has been much less attention to the sustainability of these externally assisted achievements. Will countries which have been assisted to reach universal primary education be able to sustain this when development assistance is terminated? It is not therefore just a question of whether the world is on track to reach the Dakar Goals, but whether individual countries have an economic and political environment that will continue to secure them. Intimately connected to that challenge is an assessment of what is available after school to the millions of young people who have been persuaded to enter and complete basic education. What has happened to the labour market environment, and especially to the nature of work in the widespread urban and rural informal economy, during the years that countries have been encouraged to focus on the achievement of the Dakar Goals?

Equally, in the sphere of technical and vocational skills development (TVSD),<sup>2</sup> there has been a recognition that this sector has come back on to the agenda of development partners as well as of many national governments, especially in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (NORRAG NEWS No. 38, 2007; King and Palmer, 2007). Arguably, however, there is a connection between the emphasis on EFA over the last 15 years, and the re-emergence of TVSD. Policy-makers in aid agencies and in national governments have been aware that the very success of EFA has been producing some of the largest cohorts of young school leavers ever recorded in some countries, and this has generated an intense debate about 'Education for what?' as well as on the role of skills provision as one response to the challenge. But, valuable though TVSD may be for school-leavers, it too is not a guarantee of work or of a job, whether in the formal or informal sectors. There is no automatic connection amongst school, skill and work.

Policy attention has begun to shift, therefore, to an examination of what are the enabling environments in which EFA and TVSD can lead sustainably to poverty reduction and growth (Palmer, 2008). If there is no change in the productivity of work in the informal sector, and if foreign direct investment remains miniscule for many developing countries, what will be the impact on families who have invested in the education and training of their children over this last decade and more? Will they sustain these investments for

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<sup>1</sup> The one Dakar Goal that has proved elusive is the one on 'learning and life skills' (see King and Palmer, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> TVSD is an alternative concept to the more usual technical and vocational education and training (TVET). TVSD capture both the older sense of technical and vocational expertise, as well the newer and more general term, skills development.

their younger children if school and skill do not lead to improved economic outcomes for the older ones?

The article addresses this question of whether the last 18 years since Jomtien have witnessed an element of unsustainable financing of education and training. Has there been insufficient attention, in the focus on the six Dakar Goals, on the wider investments in agriculture, industry, and infrastructure that the Commission for Africa (2005) and the UN Millennium Project (2005) have argued are necessary accompaniments to the securing of the MDGs?

Evidence will be reviewed from a series of countries that have secured consistent rates of economic growth in Africa. Some attention will be paid to China for the lessons that can be learnt from the 'development-oriented poverty reduction' in its own poorer Western provinces (LGOP, 2003).

It may be useful initially, however, to explore and clarify whether the current UN discourse about education for sustainable development, or about technical and vocational education and training (TVET), or literacy, for sustainable development, has any connection with our concerns here about sustainable financing for education and training, not to mention the sustainability of EFA achievements, or the concern with sustainable economic growth. That discourse then needs to be related conceptually to the discourse on aid dependency, with its intimate connection to sustainable national financing of education, training and other social goals. And that in turn leads straight back to the issue of continued economic growth at the country level. This tends not to look at the character of this economic growth in terms of environmental sustainability. Thus, it is suggested, here, that there is a set of key discourses that need to be connected (and interrogated) if any sense is to be made of the pursuit, simultaneously of the MDGs on the one hand, raising the levels of aid for developing countries, on the other, but also reducing aid dependency, through maintaining or increasing national levels of economic growth. It appears that the general term, 'sustainable development', is a convenient envelope which actually can contain a series of frequently conflicting goals, and not least the pursuit of financial sustainability and environmental sustainability.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Education and training for sustainable development versus sustainable levels of education and training for development

As a result of the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) was declared from 2005 to 2014. UNESCO was requested to take leadership over this decade and develop an implementation plan for it. There are four major thrusts to this discourse of education for sustainable development (ESD). These are:

- Improving access to quality basic education;
- Reorienting existing education programmes;
- Developing public understanding and awareness;
- Providing training. (UNESCO, 2005, p. 7).

Since accepting this leadership obligation, UNESCO has indeed developed an international implementation plan (UNESCO, 2005), and this document analyses the evolving notion of sustainable development. There are three core dimensions: environment, society and economy. In terms of our concern with sustainable economic growth in this present paper, it might be expected that the plan would address the nature of economic growth. Surpris-

ingly, however, there is almost no mention of economic growth at all in the entire paper.<sup>4</sup> In fact the discussion of economic issues is only in relation to poverty reduction and to corporate social responsibility and accountability. There is no attempt to discuss either the need for national economic growth to make EFA (and TVSD) sustainable, and to avoid long-term aid dependency, nor of the trade-offs between such economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Intriguingly, one of the particular characteristics of the ESD or DESD discourses is that they have a strong ethical tone to them. Thus, the implementation plan talks much more of values than of economic issues or of growth,<sup>5</sup> while in the *Prospects*' Open File on 'Education for sustainable development', the guest editor, Lopez-Ospina, talks of 'sustainable development' being 'more a *moral precept* than a *scientific concept*, linked as much with notions of fairness as with theories of global warming'. He goes on to argue that sustainable development is 'primarily a matter of culture. It is connected with *values* people cherish and with the ways in which they perceive their relationships with others' (Lopez-Ospina, 2000, pp. 32–33. Italics in original).

Similarly, in a thoughtful discussion paper on 'Orienting technical and vocational education and training for sustainable development', by the UNESCO-UNEVOC Centre in Bonn, it is argued that 'sustainable development... is primarily a matter of culture: it is concerned with the values people cherish and with the ways in which we perceive our relationships with others and with the natural world' (UNEVOC, 2006, p. 5).<sup>6</sup>

It does, however, also admit that technical and vocational education and training is too often linked into 'productivism', providing skilled workers for industry, on the assumption of continued economic growth. The UNEVOC paper argues, by contrast, that TVET can also be linked to economic literacy, sustainable production and sustainable consumption, but only with massive gains in technological efficiency and with the 'dematerialisation of production and consumption' (UNEVOC, 2006, p. 16). However, the discussion paper is more concerned with how TVET courses can build in awareness of sustainable development than with the financial sustainability of providing education and skills for all, as part of the developing world's bid for modernisation.<sup>7</sup>

In the review of the first 2 years of DESD, it is nevertheless emphasised that this initiative is wider the specifically educational projects such as EFA and the UN Decade for Literacy 'as it tackles more than just education and addresses the way we live, our attitudes and values that impact the sustainability of not just our societies but our planet' (UNESCO, 2007, p. 7). Thus, though there is a concern with some of the many dimensions of sustainability, the focus is understandably more on the ethical and cultural perspectives of building global awareness than on the tensions between education expansion and economic growth: 'Furthermore, the [High Level] Panel stressed that the ethical dimension of

<sup>4</sup> On the DESD website, there is just a sentence: 'Economy: a sensitivity to the limits and potential of economic growth and their impact on society and on the environment, with a commitment to assess personal and societal levels of consumption out of concern for the environment and for social justice.' International Implementation Scheme, downloaded from [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=23280&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23280&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html), 3/9/2007.

<sup>5</sup> 'Understanding your own values, the values of the society you live in, and the values of others around the world is a central part of education for a sustainable future' (UNESCO, 2006, p. 7).

<sup>6</sup> See also Maclean 'Technical and vocational education and training: meeting the challenge of sustainable development' (2008).

<sup>7</sup> It suggests, for instance, including 'sustainable development concepts in all courses for everyone ('TVET for all')', without commenting on the sustainability of this (UNEVOC, 2006, p. 23). Intriguingly, economic growth occurs just once in 31 pages, while sustainable occurs 116 times!

<sup>3</sup> See NORRAG NEWS No. 40 (2008).

ESD needs to be enhanced, through for instance, a simple clear common message highlighting global responsibility, community of life, and interdependence' (UNESCO, 2007, p. 11).

## 2. Education for All versus financial sustainability?

It might be anticipated, given the sheer scale of reaching Education for All, that there would have been some careful analysis of the trade-off between the costs and the sustainability of EFA. We have looked elsewhere at some of the most relevant sources between 1990 and the present on this tension (King, 2008). But both in the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All and in Dakar, there was as much emphasis on the need for there to be long-term commitment on the part of national governments as there was on aid commitments. It is worth underlining this emphasis on sustained political commitment at the national level in both Jomtien and in the World Education Forum at Dakar, since this seems to have been much less quoted than the mantra, from the same Dakar Forum, about the crucial availability of aid: 'No countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by lack of resources' (WEF, 2000, p. 16). In fact, there is more emphasis in the Dakar documentation on the crucial need for sustained political commitment at the country level than at the donor level.

It is surprising, therefore, that neither in this literature of ESD and DESD nor in other commentaries on sustainable development does this obvious tension between the sheer cost of reaching and maintaining education for all get much discussed in the same breath as sustainable development. For example in the EFA Global Monitoring Report for 2007, the following claim is made without any acknowledgement that there may be a tension between achieving universal education and sustainable development:

Building on two United Nations instruments, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the international community adopted the Declaration on Education for All at Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. At its heart is the recognition that universal education is the key to sustainable development, social justice and a brighter future. (UNESCO, 2006, p. 13)<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere in the EFA GMR for 2007, it is acknowledged, in a single, brief paragraph, that there may indeed be a problem where aid contributes a substantial share of the education (or basic education) budget. For example, for the 20 country plans thus far endorsed by the Fast Track Initiative (FTI), on average one-quarter of the costs will need to be covered by external aid. More worryingly, it was estimated in 2002 by the World Bank that to cover the financing gap for reaching universal primary education by 2015, 'aid would need to reach an average of 42% of total expenditure on primary education and much more in some countries' (UNESCO, 2006, p. 98). In other words, very substantial amounts of external funding would be needed in such countries, if the education MDGs were to be reached. What is also acknowledged, however, is the volatility and unpredictability of this external aid. In other words, the likely unsustainability of aid flows.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the Jomtien World Conference, coming one year before the Rio Summit in 1991, did not talk of sustainable development at all, but it did mention as part of its Framework for Action that 'development agencies should establish policies and plans for the 1990s, in line with their commitments to sustained, long-term support for national and regional actions...' (World Conference, 1990, p. 20).

<sup>9</sup> See further below on aid dependency, pp. 6–7.

So we have an interesting anomaly, apparently; the literature on education for sustainable development pays little attention to the sustainability of educational achievements which have, in some cases, been made possible by large amounts of rather unpredictable educational aid. This ESD literature seems more interested in how education and training at different levels can assist in transmitting messages about sustainable development than in the sustainability of national educational ambitions. On the other hand, though we have noted the emphasis in Jomtien and in Dakar on *sustained* national commitment, the EFA literature on reaching the education MDGs is generally much more preoccupied with raising the aid volumes to facilitate this process than with looking at the sustainability issues involved in reaching the MDGs on the back of external resources.

It might have been thought that what we might call a sustainable development approach to achieving the MDGs would have been highly appropriate, since it is clear that reaching the MDGs is not a 1-year Olympiad to be celebrated in 2015, but a process that needs eventually to be sustained on local resources. However, the actual MDG (7) which is directly concerned with ensuring environmental sustainability does not itself address raise any of the complexity linked to the financial sustainability of the MDG process itself; it merely promotes the idea 'to integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes; reverse loss of environmental resources' along with reducing by half the numbers without access to safe drinking water, and improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.<sup>10</sup>

We should not under-estimate the complex mix of factors that need to be borne in mind if education and sustainable development are to be satisfactorily discussed. Thus we shall first analyse the situation with a lens on education, and then include discussion on training and skills development. We shall find that it is not sufficient to talk about financing gaps, but rather a series of other factors, including country-level commitment, economic growth, the enabling environment and aid dependency, to mention just a few.

## 3. Sustainable approaches to the Dakar Goals and the education MDGs via growth?

In the EFA Global Monitoring Report of 2007, we have already noted the claim that universal primary education is the key to sustainable development. But a closer examination of the argument suggests there was an awareness in the GMR team of just how many factors needed to be considered in arguing for priority to the Dakar Goals.

For one thing, if the price tag for the achievement of the EFA agenda is really as high as US\$11 billion a year as argued by the GMR 2007 (UNESCO, 2006, p. 102), then the share of basic education in total EFA in low-income countries would need to more than double if there is to be sustained progress towards the goals. But it is not just a question of making the case to donors, many of whom have been relatively well disposed, at least in principle, towards higher aid budgets since Gleneagles in 2005. As the GMR 2007 admits, there is also more competition for new aid moneys. Increasingly, aid donors and national governments are aware that the predominantly social expenditures associated with the Dakar and MDG targets need to be accompanied by more

<sup>10</sup> For a statement of the MDG (Goal 7) on environmental sustainability, its three associated targets and the seven associated indicators, see the UN's MDG website, <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=Indicators/OfficialList.htm>. The indicators do not tackle the character at all the nature of the growth needed at the country level.



attention to infrastructure investments, if the expenditure on social spending is to be sustainable. Partly this thinking has come from the Commission for Africa, and from the Millennium Project Report, but certain donors, and notably Japan, now joined by China, and once again the [World Bank \(2006\)](#), have been urging more attention to infrastructure development. We shall look briefly at some of these accounts of the needs for massive growth in investment in infrastructure if social goals and achievements are to be sustained.

Both the Millennium Project Report and the Commission for Africa broke new ground by insisting that increased growth rates and investment would be required if the MDGs were to be secure. Indeed, the Commission for Africa has argued strongly (in its chapter on 'Going for Growth and Poverty Reduction') that Africa needed to reach an average growth rate of 7% and sustain it, if all the closely linked other investments (including social) are to be secured and sustained. But the Commission is also clear that this economic growth target needs to be associated with a strong attachment to the three goals of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental ([Commission for Africa, 2005](#), p. 219, 248). In particular there was an emphasis on the requirement that 'sustainable economic growth' involve 'prudent use of natural resources and effective protection of the environment' ([Commission for Africa, 2005](#), p. 219, 248). It was also sure that substantially increased aid would be required to help initially achieve this crucial level of economic growth.

World Bank thinking on the complex connections amongst education investment, sustainable growth and other enabling factors supports the stance taken by the Millennium Project Report and also the Commission for Africa. UPE is just the 'beginning step for survival in today's complex, fast-globalising world' ([World Bank, 2005](#), p. 47). What it terms 'education for dynamic economies' is equally a requirement to increase productivity and sustain growth. This enlarged vision is a very welcome addition to the Bank's education agenda, and it should be noted that 'financial sustainability' is included as one of the intersectoral issues that cannot be secured by focusing on development through a single lens such as education investment:

Rather than concentrate on a particular level of education, it emphasises a holistic approach that not only addresses needs at all levels, but, indeed, recognises that the challenges of access, equity, education quality, efficiency, financial sustainability, and governance and management are intra-sectoral issues that will never be adequately understood and addressed if they are considered from the perspective of education levels. ([World Bank, 2005](#), p. 48)

It should be noted that the language of 'financial sustainability' is much more acceptable than 'aid dependency'.<sup>11</sup> The ambition in the Commission for Africa, and the Millennium Project Report dramatically to increase aid, especially to Africa, has naturally raised concerns about what it actually means for a country to reach the MDGs on the back of external aid.<sup>12</sup> Aid dependency is not a popular topic in a world that is expected to assist poorer countries in reaching the MDGs; and hence the term, aid dependency, does not get much attention in any of these three reports. The Commission for Africa, under the heading of 'Is extra aid forever?', does briefly address the challenge of aid recipients becoming permanently reliant on aid. Their strong position is that, from

South Korea to Botswana, aid has been shown to be able actively to assist the transformation from being a recipient to a successful middle-income country. Their view, not dissimilar from the Millennium Project Report, is that there needs to be a sufficiently large 'big-push' from external assistance, to help kick-start the growth process. 'Where the growth process succeeds, aid tapers out'. It is only when national reform efforts, supported externally, are too small, that they fear that the 'world will be faced with a permanent aid programme to Africa' ([Commission for Africa, 2005](#), p. 327).

The World Bank, in a somewhat parallel perspective, conceives that in the poorest countries of Africa, performance-based aid can play a role in giving the political space for reforms, but this may imply 'high aid dependency for a sustained period of time' ([World Bank, 2005](#), p. 56). This open-ended commitment for many years must be a concern to many donors, even if the MDGs are seen as a minimum standard that needs to be reached, regardless of dependency. Some analysts worry that for external bodies, in effect, to be paying the teachers' salaries of poorer countries is essentially unsustainable, not just because of the unpredictability of aid and the frequent political role of teacher lobbies, but because these investments do not alter the wider macro-economic environment.

In this regard, it is worth noting what came out of the Accra Agenda for Action (AAA) through the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Ghana during September 2–4, 2008. The final version ([AAA, September 2008](#)) certainly affirmed the spirit of earlier drafts of the AAA, and emphasised the importance of reducing aid dependency through support to country-level systems and ownership. At the same time, arguably, the encouragement for aid agencies to use sector or general budget support rather than project-based approaches could well translate into aid becoming an accepted part of a government's budget.

#### 4. Reaching and securing the MDGs: a sustainability challenge

Compared to the enormous international effort put into calculating progress towards the MDGs and their specific indicators (e.g. [UN, 2007](#)), and the estimation of what nations are 'on track' to reach the Six Dakar Goals in education and which are not (through the EFA Global Monitoring Reports), it could be argued that a good deal more attention than at present might have gone into analysing the sustainability of national education and skills development systems more generally.<sup>13</sup> These systems, at secondary, vocational and tertiary levels, have in fact been directly affected, especially in economically weaker and more dependent countries, by the international preoccupation with the MDGs and the Dakar Goals.<sup>14</sup> This is a little-recognised additional impact of aid dependency.

But the impact of the international agenda-setting around EFA since Jomtien and Dakar is not only to be measured in terms of agency shifts in aid priorities<sup>15</sup>; the focus on the Dakar Goals and on the MDGs has also affected in some measure even those countries that were much less aid-dependent. The result, arguably,

<sup>13</sup> For a very early, critical discussion of the unsustainability of the 'expansionary' approaches such as those of the Jomtien Conference which commit countries to build their education systems up further on weak foundations' see [Penrose \(1993, p. 26\)](#).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of their impact on higher education, for example, see [King \(2007b\)](#).

<sup>15</sup> By no means all agencies have switched their priorities to the MDGs and the Dakar Goals, in the sphere of education, but a significant number have. And the moneys available for higher education programmes and projects, such as university links schemes, is a fraction of what is now allocated, in some agencies, for basic education projects.

<sup>11</sup> In certain development agencies, it is known that employees have been actively discouraged from talking openly about aid dependency as it might discourage other donors from increasing their aid. For a valuable discussion of aid dependency, see [Sida \(1996\)](#).

<sup>12</sup> See for a discussion of Africa's 'welfare states', [King \(2004a,b\)](#).

has been very much larger cohorts coming through primary than ever before. This, in turn, has created massive political pressure to expand both lower secondary (often said to be part of the basic cycle of education) and upper secondary.<sup>16</sup> This expansion has frequently been carried out with inadequate national financing, whether at secondary, vocational or tertiary levels. But the results of the entitlement agenda around basic education are the creation of a very large group of young people whose aspirations for work at a certain level have been lifted by completing full primary education, but for whom opportunities in the national economy have changed very little. Compared to the huge international preoccupation with the MDGs and Dakar Goals, with their focus on the supply side of the future workforce, there has been much less attention given to the creation of new productive capacities in the developing world, with the exception of the ILO's 'Decent Work for All' agenda, UNCTAD's least developed countries report (UNCTAD, 2006), and the Commission for Africa's emphasis on 'Going for Growth' and 'More Trade' (Commission for Africa, 2005, chap. 7–8).

The only parallel in the last 40–50 years was the expansion, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, of education systems (at all levels) in the immediate pre- and post-independence period. Then at least there were a significant number of new jobs created in the burgeoning ministries and through Africanisation of former European positions. But in this EFA- and MDG-led expansion, there has been little corresponding job creation. In many countries, EFA/MDG expansion has been accompanied by jobless growth. Whatever the virtues of the universal access to basic education – and few would dispute the potential of this global entitlement agenda – there is something inherently unsustainable about expecting poor countries (and poor families) to continue to invest in basic education when there is no corresponding work available, beyond what can be found in the informal economy (King, 2005).

The dilemma of Sub-Saharan Africa's abundant labour supply (fuelled in part by external aid for EFA) and minimal labour market demand has been set out very sharply by Fredriksen, former senior education advisor for Sub-Saharan Africa in the World Bank:

As regards post-basic education, I see a real problem in most African countries where:

- (i) On the (labour) supply side there is a very rapid increase in supply of youth with some primary and/or secondary education, driven by a combination of continued rapid population growth and rapid increase in intake and survival in primary education; and
- (ii) On the (labour market) demand side, a tiny modern sector (an almost nonexistent manufacturing sector in most African countries) and limited possibility for creation of modern sector jobs (outside extractive industries) due, *inter alia*, to lack of competitiveness of these countries vis-à-vis China, Vietnam and other countries on export markets due to factors such as comparatively high labour costs, and a very poor business environment that does not attract direct foreign investment.

In fact I would argue that there probably has never existed a region in the world where the gap between, respectively, supply and demand for “educated” labour is larger than in Sub-Saharan Africa today (with the exception of a few countries). How they

can reach the high level of growth needed to address this growing youth unemployment problem over the next two-three decades is for me a difficult problem.<sup>17</sup>

Fredriksen points to the growth challenge presented by these uniquely great numbers of young people exiting basic education. From one international perspective, these numbers are part of a success story, as they constitute success on the EFA Development Index (see UNESCO, 2007, p. 196); but from another, they present a huge political problem. Aid has helped to create this EFA success in countries such as Ghana, and many others. But what of the famous connection between aid and high growth rates that we were discussing above in relation to the Commission for Africa? Has Africa's economic growth in the last decade and more begun to change the economic and labour market environment which these young people will confront?

### 5. The paradox of successful growth, but with little poverty reduction, and few jobs

One of the apparent success stories in Africa has been persistently high levels of economic growth in the decade up to 2008. For instance, Ghana has experienced growth in the 4–5% range over more than 20 years, and was forecast to reach 7% in 2008 (Palmer, *this issue*). And the IMF reported in 2005 that the number of African countries reaching 5% growth had hit a record high of 20 nations with inflation of less than 10%. However, the IMF has also warned that these economies are still not growing fast enough to reduce poverty levels, and that their business environments are still not friendly enough.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) has acknowledged that 'Africa's real GDP grew by 4.6 per cent in 2004, the highest in almost a decade, up from 4.3 per cent in 2003... [this] reflects a continued upward trend since 1998. Unfortunately, the growth has so far not been translated to employment creation or poverty reduction'. (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa).<sup>19</sup> But are bodies like the Commission for Africa really saying that if only the growth rate were 7% instead of 5%, then all the positive effects would be gained? No, they are claiming that growth must indeed rise to 7% by 2010, but that it must be growth in which poor people can participate. In other words, a growth rate which is driven merely by higher oil and commodity prices is very different from growth that derives from a series of strategic investments in infrastructure, agriculture and the creation of a climate that fosters development (Commission for Africa, 2005, p. 251).

It could in fact be argued that these new, higher growth rates for much of Africa have been positively assisted by India and particularly China's search for oil and other commodities in the continent. But what Western analysts and agencies seem to be saying is that the growth rates not only need to be maintained and increased, but that parallel reforms need to be undertaken to make the investment and business environment more attractive as well as ensuring the participation of poor people in the benefits of growth. For example in Ghana, these are precisely the reforms that the government has been undertaking:

The government is in the process of implementing other strategies aimed at stimulating growth and development, for

<sup>17</sup> Birger Fredriksen to K. King, 27 August 2007.

<sup>18</sup> See report posted on <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4447773.stm>, downloaded 6 September 2007. It should be noted that Ghana has recorded high rates of poverty reduction and in addition has secured the 'Doing Business 2008: Africa Top Reformer' Award (see further Palmer, *this issue*).

<sup>19</sup> Reported in Africa Focus: 'Africa: economic growth improving' posted on [www.africafocus.org/docs05/eca0505.php](http://www.africafocus.org/docs05/eca0505.php), downloaded 6 September 2007.

<sup>16</sup> An interesting case in point would be Kenya which has not been heavily dependent on aid, but has nevertheless dramatically expanded its commitment to free primary education.

example in: infrastructure, ICT, science/technology and health. Indeed, these kind of parallel strategies appear to be in line with much of the international literature regarding the need for large multi-sectoral investments to kick-start sustainable development (e.g. Commission for Africa, UN Millennium Project). (Palmer, *this issue*)

But there is, in fact, a kind of catch 22 in Africa's pursuit of development via the MDGs and the Dakar targets. The continent has been urged to reach these but it has been acknowledged that these goals and targets are pre-eminently social investments with little specified in the way of strengthening Africa's productive capacities. Hence if countries are to develop a sustainable infrastructure and economic base to maintain their achievement of these social goals, they not only need a solid revenue base, but they need to demonstrate to their peoples that investment in 6–7 years of basic education for all their children does have a clear economic and labour market pay-off. Which may already not be the case today (see Palmer et al., 2007). What may well happen is that the pressure to provide some form of post-basic education to the most vocal (i.e. middle-class and urban populations) will mean that a substantial proportion of the primary age cohort, especially rural girls, persons with disabilities, orphans and other vulnerable children, will not be covered by basic education, or will eventually withdraw if they ever entered this level.

For there are two dimensions of sustainability related to the achievement of these goals and targets: one is economic, and relates to the national capacity to continue to fund the provision of EFA. But the second is equally vital, and could be termed *attitudinal sustainability*. It relates to the sustained commitment of the people to send all their children to school. This will not happen without it being evident that basic education is of a quality standard, and that it can lead somewhere, either in higher levels of work or of post-basic schooling.

## 6. EFA, post-basic education and training (PBET) and their enabling and sustaining economic environments

Our criticism, therefore, of the role of international agencies in the construction of the global education agenda which has held sway for 18 years, since Jomtien in 1990, is not of course that it has diverted attention to basic education from other levels of education and training.<sup>20</sup> A focus on the right of all children to basic education, even in the poorest countries in the developing world, was long overdue. Rather, it has been with the lack of attention to the conditions needed to sustain EFA in these poorer countries. One aspect of this crucial, enabling environment is within the education and training system itself, and involves seeing basic education as one part of a necessarily holistic system of post-basic education and training. A second dimension is the role of the macro-economic environment in supporting the education and training system (but also in part being dynamised by the quality of the education and training system).<sup>21</sup>

Currently we lack adequate accounts of how EFA and PBET are crucially affected by the wider macro-economic environment, and how they in turn can have a direct impact on that environment. China could provide one set of insights into this two-way process. One part of this account would be how China, through its nationwide campaign for 9-year schooling, moved from a situation where the per capita coverage of education in the workforce was just 4.3

years of schooling on average prior to 1985 to a situation in 2001 where the average per capita years of schooling was 8.1 years. This, of course, had a major impact on the capacities of China's workforce, but this extraordinary achievement was also dynamised and motivated by the opening up of China to the world, and the creation of a climate of new opportunities in work and in enterprise.

China's approach to poverty reduction affords a fascinating insight into this two-way interaction between educational and scientific provision on the one hand, and investment in productive capacity on the other. Its 'Development-Oriented Poverty Reduction Programme' gives a flavour of China's national development strategy. It is interesting to note their use of the words, 'holistic' and 'comprehensive', and to note how it parallels the assumptions made, 2 years later, by the Commission for Africa.

First, stick to the comprehensive exploitation and all-round development. As cause for poverty is complicated (sic), so are the holistic measures for alleviating poverty. We must include the development-oriented poverty alleviation in the national economic and social plan so that we can have a favourable external condition for the task. We must intensify our effort to build water conservancy, transportation, electricity, and communication infrastructures in order to contribute to the development of the poor areas and the poverty alleviation and a better life. It is necessary for the poor areas not only to develop production, increase farmers' incomes, but also pay attention to the development of science and technology, education, health care and culture, improve the community environment, raise the quality of life and propel a harmonious development and all round progress. Only in doing so, can we eradicate the poverty at its root. (LGOP, 2003, pp. 98–99)

Currently, a series of other countries<sup>22</sup> are being looked at in ways that would analyse how the provision and impact of skills training programmes need to take account of the wider economic, social and political environment. Instead of a solely education-centric or training-centric approach, these two-way research approaches hope to show that the impact of education and training systems is inseparable from the environments in which they are embedded. This is not a deterministic position, because, as has been argued above, the character, quality and extent of education and training systems also have an influence on these surrounding environments.

It may be useful to close with a listing of just a few areas where 'going for growth' needs to be rethought much more carefully in relation to sustainable education systems.

## 7. Provisional propositions on the complex dimensions of education, skill and sustainability

- The UN and UNESCO discourses around 'Education and Training for Sustainable Development' are highly edu-centric; they expect education and training to raise awareness of sustainable development. But they have thus far paid little attention to the sustainability of the systems of education and training themselves.
- The EFA and MDG discourses also seem to pay relatively little attention to the differential national capacity to sustain the achievement of the Dakar Goals or the MDGs, even when securing these is heavily dependent on external aid. Aid

<sup>20</sup> On the role of multilateral agencies in the construction of the global agenda for education, see King (2007a).

<sup>21</sup> See Palmer et al. (2007) for a discussion of these two interacting dimensions of the sustaining environment for EFA. See the DFID website [www.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/educating-out-poverty-70.pdf](http://www.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/educating-out-poverty-70.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> India, Pakistan and Ghana, which are part of the DFID consortium on analysing the outcomes of education (RECOUN), have during 2007–2008 done qualitative analysis of skills training that would seek to map this against changes in the surrounding, enabling (or disabling) environment, <http://recoun.educ.cam.ac.uk/>.

dependency is little discussed in these discourses, since the emphasis has often been on the need dramatically to increase external aid rather than review the dangers of its volatility and unpredictability.

- The Commission for Africa and the UN Millennium Project discourses assume a virtuous relationship between substantial, long-term aid flows and a certain rather high level of GDP growth (by OECD standards)—7%. In this thinking, aid is assumed to be able to play a key role in kick-starting a pattern of sustainable growth.
- Inadequate attention has been given to several sustainability dimensions of the relationship between education and skills development, on the one hand, and their surrounding environments, on the other. Such evidence as we have of the crucial two-way relationships between education and training and their enabling (or indeed disabling) environments would suggest that further research would throw valuable light on the aspirations of young people and their families to sustain their commitment to basic and post-basic education.

These few propositions suggest that, theoretically, we have a long way to go in understanding the complexity of the interactions amongst education, skills and sustainable growth.

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